

When talking about prison reform, we need to talk about people

Your Turn

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Guest Columnist

Criminal justice reform has been a major debate during the state budget process this year — driven by wide media coverage of the costly, illegal strike by correctional officers and ongoing protests and murder cases of officers allegedly responsible for recent prison deaths. Most discussions remain tightly focused around budgets, efficiencies and legalities — and not people. The system is not broken: it is working as designed. Reform needs to be much more substantive.

Ask: why are people in prison? Many are incarcerated because of their disabilities, or because they were poor, or because early intervention systems around housing, education, and mental health failed them. Jails and prisons have become warehouses for shared social failures.

For many, the difficulties are magnified as they walk into a jail or prison. Basic human needs from sanitary products, to medication, to therapy, are thin and mostly denied. Many are punished for behaviors directly related to their physical and mental disabilities. Medical crises all too often result in conflict and “non-compliance” punishment.

The majority of criminal justice reform efforts are focused on improving existing structures and procedures, rather than acknowledge how incarceration intrinsically operates to further endanger people’s health, lives and recovery. Any reform needs to start

and end with people — and the brutality of their incarcerated experiences.

On May 5 a contingent of concerned upstate residents, from multiple community groups, went to Albany to discuss reform with our legislators. Rather than tinker with existing conditions, we thus focused on bills and policy proposals for decarceration and improved oversight and accountability.

If we were serious about prison reform, we would do more than close a few facilities or increase work-release programs as many propose. We would staff our prisons and jails with trauma-informed providers. We would enforce laws regarding disability and solitary with the same robustness we enforce the rules about family visitors. We would stop treating solitary confinement as a substitute for medical and mental care. We would abandon internal grievance processes that ignore legitimate complaints and create systems of accountability. We would fund community-based programs for those behind walls. We would listen when people talk and not wait until they are crying out in pain.

Current efforts by families and community advocates to lessen carceral violence do result in isolated victories. A transfer to a mental health facility is granted. The proper medication prescribed. A lawyer contacted. A class action lawsuit is won. People get needed hygiene products, relief from solitary, and access to family. These are small wins against a system that thrives on dehumanization. We need more.

In short, when people talk about prison reform it is too often limited to enhancing current conditions, cost savings and prison and jail closures. We have to think outside the box. We need to remember who are inside: our parents, our children, our siblings, our friends and our neighbors. And we need to remember what they endured and what our responsibility is to them.

Rozann Greco is an Endicott resident.



On April 3, a rally led by local community and immigration advocates outside the Broome County jail called on local law enforcement to cease its participation in a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement program.

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